SST 30-2 7.6 Liberal Democracy Resources

**Liberalism**

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By the early 19th century liberalism was on the march. By 1810 and for many years thereafter, "liberal" was a very positive word: in *Emma*, for example, the novelist Jane Austen writes that "the Coles had been settled in Highbury and were a good sort of people, friendly, liberal and unpretending." The first political connotation of "liberal" appeared in Spain. In 1812 the Liberals, a middle-class movement opposed by nobles and clergy, succeeded in giving the Spanish nation a brief respite from absolutism by winning acceptance of a Constitution. The name became politicized in Great Britain and North America in the 1820s when the British Tories used it as a term of abuse to taunt the more progressive Whigs.

Nearly two centuries after its invention, the label still denotes opprobrium in some quarters. In the US, for example, Republican politicians like Ronald Reagan and Newt Gingrich have largely succeeded in demonizing the term. "Liberals are so far left," Reagan told his audiences, "that they have left America"; and Newt Gingrich routinely attacked his opponents as "radical liberals." But in Canada and Europe, liberalism is still an honourable part of the vocabulary.

Liberals believe that every individual has a special dimension, a uniqueness that cries out to be realized. The purpose of life is to realize that potential, to become whatever it is one is capable of becoming. As a free agent man is able to define and pursue his own definition of happiness, his own version of the good, his own set of values. The role of the state is to produce the conditions under which individuals have the broadest possible choice in deciding upon their definition of the good. Society, meanwhile, should relish this diversity while dispensing equal treatment regardless of one's origins, colour, sex or status in life. In exchange for this respect, the individual must acknowledge responsibility for his own fortunes and for the fortunes of the community.

It is this individualistic essence which distinguishes liberalism from conservatism or socialism. Whatever their disagreements about the ends of society, both conservatives and socialists believe that society is more than a collection of autonomous individuals. Conservatives favour an organic hierarchical society, socialists stress the primacy of class but the central concept for both is a collectivity. Liberalism, therefore, is a particular way of thinking about human needs and the political good. It is not the property of a single political party. In Canada it forms almost as an important a strand in the ideology of the Progressive Conservative, Reform and New Democratic parties as it does in the Liberal Party for, whatever the party label, if the primary focus of one's concern is individual self-realization, liberalism has won a convert.

Liberalism came to Canada with the United Empire Loyalists. Devoted to British institutions (especially to the monarchy), the Loyalists bitterly opposed American republicanism; but as North Americans accustomed to economic mobility and representative government, they were equally passionate about individual liberty.

The Constitutional Act of 1791 which created the elected assemblies of Upper and Lower Canada was liberalism's first success in Canada. Responsible government, representation by population, minority rights, and the welfare state have followed. The Loyalists' settlement set a pattern persisting from that era to our own: influenced in equal parts by British and American developments, with an occasional leavening from the Continent such as the impact of the 1848 Revolution on the Rouges, liberalism has formed the core of the Canadian public philosophy.

Liberalism is not without its detractors. Noted scholars such as George [GRANT](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/george-grant/) or C.B. Macpherson criticize the very foundations of the philosophy: they oppose a "possessive individualism" which stresses the acquisition of property by competitive individuals and they favour a more co-operative form of society which has a purpose above and beyond the individual rights and desires of its members.

There is an inner tension too within liberalism that often pits one school of thought against another. Liberals agree that they want to expand choice but how best to do so? The "classical" school of liberalism concentrates on freedom from external interference: government is feared, the market economy is favoured, private autonomy is valued. Positive liberalism, however, points out that having the absolute right to do something is meaningless unless one has the actual capability of doing it. Liberty is more than the absence of restraint, it must include equality of opportunity. Liberal egalitarians demand positive programs to redistribute wealth and to create more fairness in the competition of life.

Despite this basic dispute over whether the state is an obstacle to be removed or an instrument to be used, Canadian liberalism has made one very real contribution to the practice of democratic governance. How best to reconcile ethnic pluralism and minority rights within a national community is a problem that plagues much of the world. India is but one example of a society beset by social and religious discord. Liberals in Canada have always placed a premium on protecting minority rights. In 1982 the [CANADIAN CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/article/canadian-charter-of-rights-and-freedoms/) advanced this cause in a quantum way through entrenching into the Canadian Constitution both basic liberties and new linguistic rights for minorities. The overriding purpose of the Charter for its proponents was to entrench rights, especially language rights, where no government could ever take them away. With the Charter as a shield a single citizen can achieve Locke's vision of a society in which rights take precedence over authority.

The proudest achievement of Canadian liberalism has been, in the words of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Canada's most eloquent liberal, the creation of this "regime of tolerance."

http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/liberalism/

**Liberal Democracy**

Liberal [democracy](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/democracy_and_america.htm) is frequently used to describe the political philosophy of [America](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/ampol.htm). Though books may argue about how many governments America has, each sector of [government](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/fed.htm) would claim to base itself on liberal [democracy](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/democracy_and_america.htm). Indeed the basis of governments having to go to the [electorate](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/america_and_elections.htm) on a fixed and frequent rate is part of this democratic process whereby government is done for the people rather than an exercise that leads to the creation of policies but at the exclusion of public debate.

**Liberalism**

is a political view that seeks to change the political, economic or social quo to foster the development and well-being of the individual. Liberals regard the individual as a rational creature who can use his or her intelligence to overcome human and natural obstacles to a good life for all without resorting to violence against the established order. Liberalism is more concerned with process, with the method of solving problems, than with a specific programme.

In the C18 and C19 liberalism emphasized the full development of the individual free from the restraints of government. In the C20, liberalism has seen a change of direction in that it looks to government as a means of correcting the abuses and shortcomings of society through the use of positive programmes of action. Today’s liberals would see the government as a positive force in issues involving, for example, civil rights when the government can use its authority and power to change society for the good so that individuals can experience a positive benefit to their lives brought about by government action. In this sense, modern liberals do not see the government necessarily as a major threat to individual freedom.

**Democracy**

is a frequently used word but its meaning is rarely fully understood. A democratic political system is one in which the ultimate political authority is vested in the people. The word democracy comes from the Greek words **"demos"** which means the people and **"kratos"** which means authority.

Democracy may be direct, as practised in New England town meetings, or indirect and representative. In the modern pluralistic democratic state, power typically is exercised in groups or institutions in a complex system of interactions that involves compromises and bargaining in the decision process. The democratic creed includes the following four concepts:

**Individualism**; which holds that the primary task of government is to enable each individual to achieve the highest potential of development.

**Liberty**; which allows each individual the greatest amount of freedom consistent with order.

**Equality** which maintains that all persons are created equal and have equal rights and opportunities.

**Fraternity**; which postulates that individuals will not misuse their freedom but will co-operate in creating a wholesome society.

As a political system, democracy starts with the assumption of popular sovereignty, vesting ultimate power in the people. It presupposes that people can control their destiny and that they can make moral judgements and practical decisions in their day lives. In implies a continuing search for truth in the sense of humanity’s pursuit of improved ways of building social institutions and ordering human relations. Democracy requires a decision-making system based on majority rule, with minority rights protected.

Effective guarantees of freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly, petition and of equality before the law are indispensable to a democratic system of government. Politics, parties and politicians are the catalytic agents that make democracy workable.

"Most Americans think of their political system as best described by the term democratic." (Plano and Greenberg). Yet the word does not appear in the Declaration of Independence nor in the American Constitution - though the word was rarely used anywhere in the world when these two documents were produced. For a number of centuries democracy was regarded as a dangerous and unworkable doctrine. It took a hold in the western world during the C19 and C20 and was attacked by both extreme left and right wing political groups. There are those who condemn it as mob rule that vulgarises society and as a belief that tolerates mediocrity and incompetence. It has also been criticised as a sham - a belief that can’t work as it goes against human nature. i.e. a government will claim to be democratic in name but in practice it will decide what it will do for the people as an election victory has given it the public mandate to do this but it will rarely - if at all - use referendums to fully find out what the public think about potential legislation during the life time of that government.

Plano and Greenberg believe that for democracy to work in its purest form it needs to have certain pre-requisites. Society has to be educated and responsible. The state must have a degree of economic stability. Social cohesion and social consensus must exist. Above all, it requires the acceptance of the democratic "rules of the game";

**that there should be frequent and fair elections. that the losers must accept the verdict of the public and allow the majority to govern that the majority will respect the right of the minority to provide the government with opposition if the minority wins a future election, it will be permitted to take over the reins of government.**

Can democracy ever be created in its most perfect form? It is argued that if governments try to move in the direction of democracy then they have the right to be labeled democratic. Democracy found in America and western Europe was given a huge boost in the 1980s and 1990s when many communist governments gave way to what were termed democratic ones. The same thing is occurring in the Third World which is further undermining the hold of authoritarian regimes but giving a further boost to western style democracy.

http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/liberal\_democracy.htm

**Liberalism on human nature**

Posted by Nicole Berry on April 12, 2010

During the 18th Century new religious, political and philosophical ideas were emerging under the umbrella term of ‘The Enlightenment’. During this time, liberalism was establishing itself as a political ideology, bearing new ideas about human nature and from this the ideal role of the state.

Both types of liberalism (modern and classical) have an optimistic view of human nature. Liberal thinkers such as John Locke and Jeremy Bentham perceived humans as rational beings who act in their own self-interest by seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Classical liberals would argue that if humans are inherently reasonable and self seeking, then a successful society can based on meritocracy without the need for an overbearing state to control us. Jeremy Bentham argued that the state should only intervene in the case of ‘other regarding actions’, i.e. cases in which an individual’s freedom imposes upon another’s.

The modern liberal T.H Green suggested that people have a natural desire to enhance others’ welfare as well as their own. Hence, people are both philanthropic and egotistical. In redefining what it means to be free after viewing the negative outcomes of the Industrial Revolution, this philanthropic instinct suggested that the state should help those in need, enabling them to achieve the same fulfilment as others through the provision of state welfare ( as proposed, for example, by the Beveridge Report in 1942). In the economic sphere, however, the state should remain firmly in the background.

This optimistic view of human nature regards the state as a precautionary observer with limited interference, contrasting with the austere paternalism necessitated by a conservative’s pessimistic view of human nature.

Should we be so optimistic about human nature?

<http://politicsforalevel.wordpress.com/2010/04/12/liberalism-on-human-nature/>

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